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ABSTRACT

The Austin Independent School District (AISD) adopted the middle school concept in 1987-88. Generally, the middle school setting serves students between the ages of 11 and 14 and includes grades 6 through 8. In 1995-96, five middle schools met the criteria for funding under Title I. To make middle schools more responsive to the special needs of adolescents, the AISD has initiated many changes in recent years. Academic teams of teachers use interdisciplinary approaches to ensure academic excellence for all students. Homerooms, or advisories, meet at many of the middle schools to involve students in activities that strengthen self-concept and develop academic and personal skills. The Title I evaluation staff designed interview and survey instruments to evaluate the five middle schools. All of these schools had received unacceptable ratings by the Texas Education Agency in 1995. The schools were implementing practices and programs to deal with the unique challenges of their campuses. Some of the innovative approaches included block scheduling, dress codes, tutoring programs, pre-advanced placement classes, technology integration programs, adult literacy and General Education Development classes, and school organization models. Title I funds made most of these innovations possible. Principals and teachers at all the schools felt that parent participation was improving. Strong leadership at all schools appeared to be working toward academic improvement, and an atmosphere of change was apparent at each of the schools. Recommendations are made for continued use of Title I funds. Appendixes contain the teacher and principal surveys from the evaluation and the districtwide coordinated survey. (Contains 22 figures, 7 tables, and 16 references.) (SLD)

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# Title I Middle Schools Evaluation, 1997-98

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# Title I Middle Schools Evaluation, 1997-98
## Executive Summary

Austin Independent School District
Department of Accountability, Student Services, and Research
Office of Program Evaluation

*Authors: Janice Curry, Julia Griffith, Wanda Washington, Glovia Zyskowski, Ph.D.*

### *Program Description*

The Austin Independent School District (AISD) adopted the middle school concept in the fall of 1987-88. Generally, the middle school setting serves students between the ages of 11 and 14 and includes students in grades 6-8.

In 1995-96, AISD made Title I funds available to secondary schools. AISD distributes those funds to schools where 70% or more of the students are from low-income families (based on free and reduced-price lunch). Five middle schools meet this criterion for receiving Title I funds: Dobie, Fulmore, Mendez, Pearce, and Webb. Funds available to these middle schools in 1997-98 total over one million dollars ($1,172,723).

### *AISD Middle Schools*

Adolescence is commonly viewed as a turbulent period in the maturation process. To make middle schools more developmentally responsive to young adolescents, many changes have been initiated at AISD middle schools in recent years. Academic teams of teachers use interdisciplinary approaches to ensure academic excellence for all students. Teaming allows better communication, more nurturing of students, opportunities for teacher-student bonding, more relevant instruction, and more individual attention to all students. Homerooms, or advisories, meet at many of the middle schools to involve students in activities that strengthen self-concept, develop personal skills, improve citizenship, develop social skills, improve cultural/ethnic relations, and teach decision-making skills.

AISD defines a balanced curriculum to meet the needs of young adolescents as one that includes:

- an interdisciplinary team approach where basic skills are stressed across subject areas;
- broad-based instruction supplemented with enrichment opportunities;
- a range of elective programs including fine arts, foreign language, and career programs;
- varied instructional strategies to meet the needs of individual learning styles and functional levels; and
- a well-balanced curriculum that exceeds the basic requirements of the Texas Education Agency.

### *Methodology*

With the understanding that early adolescence is a critically important time in a student's overall development, the Title I evaluation staff designed a plan for the 1997-98 school year to examine the five Title I middle schools in the district. The purpose of this review was to investigate a group of schools that has historically been overlooked in discussions of Title I and its impact on student achievement, and to provide information about successful practices in use at these AISD schools.

To obtain information on the factors that affect students, teachers, and administrators at middle schools, the Title I evaluation staff designed interview and survey instruments, and administered them at the five Title I middle school campuses. Both multiple-choice and open-ended response items were used. TAAS data were also examined for the past three school years.

### *Achievement*

The most common characteristic of these schools is change efforts directed at improving student achievement. All of the Title I middle schools received an unacceptable rating by the Texas Education Agency in 1995. The changes that schools are implementing seek to improve student learning and teacher preparedness.

- The 1997 TAAS results showed that all of the Title I middle schools met that year's goal of 35% passing in each subject for the entire student body and each disaggregated group.
- When the percentage of all students passing TAAS is compared, Title I middle school students fall behind non-Title I middle school students by at least 20 percentage points. However, the economically disadvantaged students at Title I and non-Title I middle schools passed TAAS reading and mathematics at similar rates in 1997.
- The average Texas Learning Index (TLI) for Title I middle school students was 70 or greater for all disaggregated groups in TAAS reading, although the TAAS mathematics TLI scores for Title I students were below 70 for every group except White students.
- The Title I middle schools used other methods of assessment besides TAAS. Portfolio assessment and *Guerrilla Math* materials are examples of strategies used by some of the schools to better assess the needs of students.

### *Innovative Practices*

The Title I middle schools are implementing practices and programs to deal with the unique challenges of their campuses.

- Some of the innovative practices used at Title I middle schools include flexible block scheduling, restrictive dress code, tutoring before and after school for at-risk students, pre-AP classes, technology integration programs, adult literacy and GED classes, and school organization models.
- Title I funds make many of the innovations at the middle schools possible. Principals say that the flexibility of Title I funds allows them to hire additional staff for areas of greatest need. Extra personnel made possible by Title I funds include parent teacher specialists, assistant principals, curriculum coordinators, technology coordinators, teachers, and teacher assistants.
- Staff development, computer hardware and software, consultants, and teaching materials are some of the items that have been funded at the Title I middle schools to enhance learning.

### *Parent Participation*

- Principals and teachers at all of the schools feel that parent participation is improving, but is not yet at the desired level.
- Teachers and administrators show that they are sensitive to the needs of today's parents by scheduling parent conferences as late as 9:00 p.m. and offering night classes in literacy and general education for parents. Several schools have added programs for dads.

### *Leadership*

Strong leadership is key to the improvements that are occurring at the Title I middle schools.

- All of the middle schools appear to have strong leaders in their principals.
- The Title I middle school principals have different styles of leadership and

come from different backgrounds, but the effect is the same – improved achievement.

***School Climate***

- An atmosphere of change is present at each of the Title I middle schools.
- Because the teachers and administrators are working together for improvement in student achievement, the climate at most of these schools is very positive.
- Most of the teachers interviewed felt that they are involved in planning for the school.
- While teachers believe that there is a feeling of community among teachers and students at their campuses, they are less sure about students' feelings about the school.

***Teacher Responses***

- Because middle school teachers have either elementary or secondary certification as opposed to specific middle school certification, they come to this setting with different perspectives about students and learning.
- While many opportunities for professional development are available to middle school teachers, most of the middle school teachers interviewed believe that training which deals with the special needs of the middle school student is lacking in their professional development.
- Ninety-two percent of Title I middle school teachers agree or strongly agree that they are free to adapt the curriculum to address individual student learning styles.
- Teachers seem to appreciate the efforts of their principal to improve student performance.

***Recommendations***

1. Continue to use Title I funds to supplement schoolwide instructional programs at secondary Title I schools.
2. Monitor TAAS achievement at the Title I middle schools, and recognize the schools' efforts to increase student achievement.
3. Offer more sessions at the Professional Development Academy that are specific to the special needs of the young adolescent.

***Funding***

1997-98 Title I Middle School Funding by School:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Dobie | | $ 213,263 |
| Fulmore | | 132,441 |
| Mendez | | 287,492 |
| Pearce | | 223,304 |
| Webb | | 225,514 |
| | ***Total*** | ***$1,172,723*** |

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# INTRODUCTION

## Middle Schools Literature Review

Adolescence is commonly viewed as a turbulent period in the maturation process. During this time adolescents undergo a rapid number of developmental changes -- puberty, cognitive growth, experimentation, an evolving sense of identity – unlike anything they have experienced since infancy (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Jordan, 1993). Developing a sense of identity is especially crucial during this time. Decisions such as who to date, where to go to college, what to study, which political affiliation to follow, etc., are all part of the process of identity formation (Marcia, 1980). A well-formed identity guides vocational direction, and is the basis for the security needed to develop close relationships in the future (Marcia, 1980). As adolescents begin to develop their own identity and struggle to become more independent from their parents, the school environment and the social interactions that take place there become increasingly important in determining adolescents' perceptions of themselves and their environment. During this time, teachers and other school personnel assume an important role in the development of the adolescents they teach. However, administrators across the country report that only 25% of middle school teachers have the specialized training needed to understand and successfully teach young adolescents (Viadero, 1996).

Middle schools are faced with disturbing statistics about their students. In 1994, only 28% of eighth-graders nationwide scored at or above the proficient level in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Equally troubling was the performance of U.S. 7th- and 8th-grade students on the Third International Mathematics and Science Study. When compared to students in 41 countries, these U.S. students ranked 28th in mathematical skills and 17th in science proficiency (Lipsitz, Jackson, & Austin, 1997).

Eighty-eight percent of public school students begin middle school at a new campus, a transition that can seem quite overwhelming (NMSA #4). Parental involvement traditionally declines in middle schools, often because of a belief on the parents' part that educational involvement is unnecessary as the adolescent becomes more independent (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). However, even during adolescence, parents are still the predominant influence for both the moral and social values of their children (Conger, 1972). Nonetheless, only about 40% of middle schools have programs in place to increase parental involvement (Viadero, 1995). The guidance adolescents need to make responsible decisions for their future is increasingly taking place at school, and middle school teachers and administrators recognize the need to provide a developmentally appropriate environment that considers both social and personality development *"not because this contributes to academic achievement, but because such development is valuable in and of itself"* (Whistler, 1990).

### Changing the Middle School

*Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century: The Report from the Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents*, published by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989), recognized the need to improve the educational experience of middle school students, and made recommendations for changes in the following eight areas:

- create small communities for learning;
- teach a core academic program;
- ensure success for all students;

- empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle grade students;
- staff middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents;
- improve academic performance through fostering the health and fitness of young adolescents;
- re-engage families in the education of young adolescents; and
- connect schools with communities.

It is the Carnegie Council's hope that by making significant changes in these areas, middle schools can develop *"mature young people of competence, compassion, and promise."*

Responding to this need, the National Middle School Association (NMSA) published, *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools* (1995). The NMSA describes developmentally responsive schools as those that provide students with the following:

- staff that are knowledgeable about their students and are sensitive to their individual differences and needs;
- local school districts that provide and encourage ongoing professional development for middle school staff that is specifically designed to meet the needs of educators at the middle grade level; and
- staff who provide students with a challenging curriculum and hold them to high expectations.

In addition, all students should have one adult at their school who knows them well enough to recognize academic and behavioral changes in them, and who provides a link between school and home life.

Researchers at the University of Florida in Gainesville found that "looping," which bands together the same students and teachers for more than one year, received high ratings from educators (*Education Week*, November 13, 1996). Ninety-three percent of the teachers surveyed believed that looping allowed them to stay in closer touch with parents of students who were having trouble, 84% reported that this practice helped classroom management, and 90% reported that achievement increased because they were better able to determine what the students needed.

Cotton (1982) and Armstrong (1977, cited in NMSA #12) reported that student achievement did not appear to be affected by the type of organizational structure used at a given campus; they reported that achievement did not increase with either interdisciplinary team organization or the traditional departmental organization. Bradley (1988, cited in NMSA #12) matched 78 pairs of 7th-graders from either interdisciplinary or departmental organizations and found math gains for the interdisciplinary group and equal reading achievement gains across groups. Van Zandt and Totten (1995, cited in NMSA #12) noted that the inconsistency of the findings from team-related studies indicates that there is little conclusive research on the effectiveness of advisory programs.

Seghers (1995) studied the extent to which 154 Louisiana schools had incorporated the advice recommended in the Carnegie Council's *Turning Points* document. He found that principals reported that providing an "emotionally safe" environment for students and hiring teachers committed to young adolescents were the recommendations most often implemented, and organizing teachers into teams and offering students "exploratory" classes were among the least implemented suggestions. Seghers also reported that hiring teachers certified to teach middle-level students, and providing a curriculum that emphasized thinking and problem-solving skills and reflected real-life experiences improved standardized test scores for 6th- and 7th-grade students. Natriello, et al. (as

cited in Wells, 1989) also noted that linking school curriculum with career education shows students how the skills they learn in school today can benefit them in the future. However, while some schools are adopting the Carnegie Council's recommendations, a 1993 survey of middle school administrators conducted by the NMSA reported that 90% of schools are still using the traditional practice of lecturing as the primary mode of teaching (Viadero, 1996).

Research has indicated that retaining middle school students does not improve academic achievement (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1988, as cited in Wells). Students are less likely to leave school when they work with teachers who are flexible, positive, creative, and person- rather than rule-oriented (Bhaerman & Kopp, 1986, as cited in Wells). A national study by Epstein (as cited in Viadero, 1995) reported that schools which had some form of weekly advisory group had one percent fewer students drop out before finishing high school. Schools that graded students on progress as well as academic performance reported 1.7% fewer dropouts.

Overall, middle school educators have the challenging job of both guiding and teaching students who are experiencing a considerable amount of emotional and physical change. Research that focuses on the outcomes of incorporating changes, such as those outlined by the Carnegie Council and the National Middle Schools Association, will increase the likelihood of schools adopting strategies that lead to positive change in the middle grades. Programs such as the middle years education degree program at North Carolina State University are the first step towards giving middle school educators the preparation they need to provide a successful middle school experience for their students.

## AISD Middle Schools

To address the specific needs of young adolescents in the district, the Austin Independent School District (AISD) has been in the process of restructuring middle schools for several years. To make middle schools more developmentally responsive to the middle grade student, many changes had to be initiated. The following factors describe the middle school setting in AISD today, according to the planning guide for secondary students, *AISD Secondary School Information and Planning Guide, Grades 6-12.*

- Middle school is an educational setting that serves students between the ages of 11 and 14 and includes students in grades 6-8.
- Middle schools are schools-within-a-school where students are divided into smaller teams consisting of a common group of students and teachers. Each student is assigned to a community or "family."
- Academic teams of teachers use interdisciplinary approaches to ensure academic excellence for students. Teaming allows better communication, more nurturing of students, opportunities for teacher-student bonding, more relevant instruction, and more individual attention to all students.
- Homerooms, or advisories, meet regularly to involve students in activities that strengthen self-concept, develop personal skills, improve citizenship, develop social skills, improve cultural/ethnic relations, and teach decision-making skills.

### Curriculum

The middle school curriculum in AISD offers opportunities for students to explore a wide range of subjects. The academic program provides all students the same basic course of study

including English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. To enhance the core curriculum, AISD also offers discovery, fine arts, technical education, physical education, and elective courses. Honors/pre-AP (Advanced Placement) and gifted/talented courses in reading, English, mathematics, science, and social studies are designed to provide additional challenges within the traditional program of instruction.

As stated in the planning guide for middle grade students, a balanced curriculum based on the needs of young adolescents reflects a consideration of the following:

- an interdisciplinary team approach where basic skills are stressed across subject areas;
- broad-based instruction with enrichment opportunities;
- a range of elective programs including fine arts, foreign language, and career programs;
- varied instructional strategies to meet the needs of individual learning styles and functioning levels; and
- a well-balanced curriculum that exceeds the basic requirements of the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

### *Initiatives*

The district's middle school principals were asked by the Area 3 Superintendent, Dr. Yolanda Rocha, to identify the highest priority middle school initiatives. The identified priorities include pre-AP classes, interdisciplinary units, flexible block scheduling, and Connected Mathematics Project.

To address these priorities, all of the Title I middle school principals are using interdisciplinary teaming at their campus. Flexible block scheduling is being implemented at Webb Middle School this year. Also, a majority of the middle school principals reported that they want their teachers to complete training to become certified in gifted/talented and AP. Ongoing initiatives at middle schools include advisory periods, academic teaming, study skills classes, school-to-career emphases, and service learning opportunities.

### *Demographics*

The percentage of economically disadvantaged students at the Title I middle schools (79.2) is much higher than the percentages at all middle schools (48.9) and all AISD schools (50.7). For an AISD school to receive Title I funds, 70% or more of the students must receive free and reduced-priced lunch. Five of the fifteen middle schools in the district meet this criterion: Dobie, Mendez, Fulmore, Pearce, and Webb. Figure 1 presents the demographics for Title I middle schools, all AISD middle schools, and the district as a whole. It can be seen that, in 1997-98, the percentages of Hispanic and African American students are higher and the Anglo/Other percentage is lower at the Title I middle schools than at all middle schools and in the district as a whole.

Figure 1: Demographics for Title I Middle Schools, All AISD Middle Schools, and All AISD Students, 1997-98

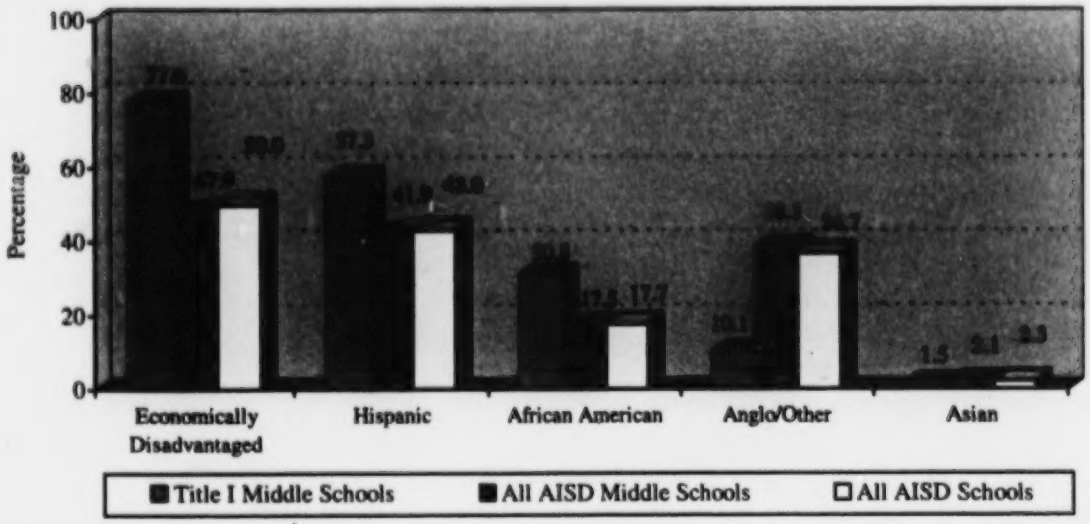
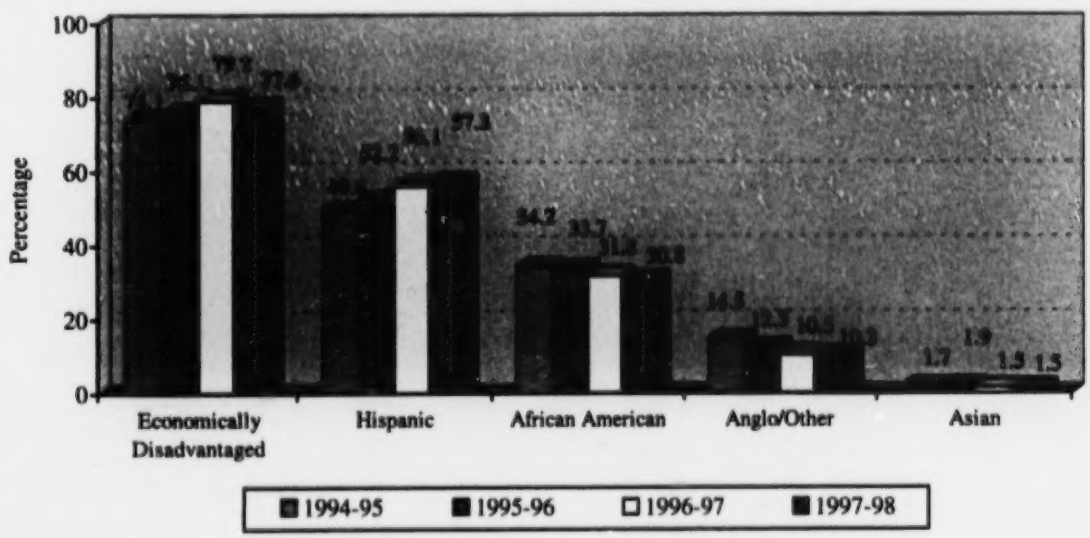



Figure 2 shows the change in school demographics for Title I middle schools from 1994-95 to 1997-98. The demographic changes for Title I middle schools mirror the general trends in the district, including:

- an increasing Hispanic percentage;
- a slight decrease in the economically disadvantaged percentage in 1997-98 after steady increases for the three years prior;
- a decreasing Anglo/Other percentage; and
- fairly constant percentages of African American and Asian students.

Figure 2: Title I Middle School Demographics, 1994-95 through 1997-98



## Evaluation Methodology

With the understanding that early adolescence is a critically important time in a student's overall development, the Title I evaluation staff designed a plan for the 1997-98 school year to examine the five Title I middle schools in the district. The purpose of this review was to investigate a group of schools that has historically been overlooked in discussions of Title I and its impact on student achievement, and to provide information about successful practices in use at these AISD schools. The schools included in this study are Dobie, Fulmore, Mendez, Pearce, and Webb.

To obtain information on the factors that affect students, teachers, and administrators at middle schools, the Title I evaluation staff designed interview and survey instruments, and administered them at the five Title I middle school campuses. Both multiple-choice and open-ended response items were used. Copies of the instruments are included in Appendix A.

Title I staff visited each of the five middle school campuses and interviewed the principals. The interview covered the following aspects of middle school operations:

- school climate;
- special programs/teaching strategies;
- student achievement; and
- professional development.

Results of these interviews are presented in the individual school reports, along with general findings in the summary section of this report.

All teachers at the Title I middle schools were asked to complete individual, multiple-choice surveys. In addition, each principal was asked to select at least three teachers to be interviewed by the evaluation staff for a more in-depth look at teacher perceptions of the various programs in use at the campus. Results of the teacher surveys and interviews are included in the summary section of this document.

The Title I evaluation staff also examined TAAS data for the past three school years. Average passing rates on reading, writing, and mathematics were examined longitudinally across disaggregated groups for each campus, and this information is presented in the individual school reports. In addition, the Title I middle schools were compared to non-Title I middle schools and to the overall district middle school averages on TAAS for the past school year. Average percent passing on reading, writing, and mathematics, and average TLI scores on reading and mathematics were examined. Results of these comparative analyses are presented in the summary section of this document.

# MIDDLE SCHOOL REPORTS

## Dobie Middle School

Dobie Middle School was built in northeast Austin in 1973. There are 933 students in grades 6, 7, and 8 who attend Dobie. The October 1997 enrollment figures show that 46% are African American, 37% are Hispanic, 11% are Anglo/Other, and 6% are Asian. Seventy-eight percent of the students are from low-income families. Table 1 shows that the African American and Anglo/Other populations have decreased from 1994-95 to 1997-98 while the Hispanic and Asian populations have increased.

Table 1: Demographics for Dobie Middle School, 1994-95 through 1997-98

| Demographics | 1994-95 | 1995-96 | 1996-97 | 1997-98 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ethnicity | | | | |
| % African Am. | 53 | 49 | 49 | 46 |
| % Hispanic | 26 | 33 | 33 | 37 |
| % Asian | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| % Anglo/Other | 16 | 12 | 13 | 11 |
| % Low Income | 70 | 79 | 79 | 78 |

Note: The 1997-98 demographics reflect the October 23, 1997 enrollment.

Dobie has received Title I funds since 1995-96, the first year of secondary Title I funding in AISD. The 1997-98 Title I allocation for Dobie is $213,263. According to Patrick Patterson, the principal of Dobie, the Title I funds have allowed Dobie to do the following:

- hire eight additional staff persons, among them a parent training specialist and a technology coordinator;
- purchase capital outlay items such as computers and equipment for the multi-media lab; and
- provide staff development, adult literacy classes, and summer school for ESL students; and
- fund other Campus Improvement Plan (CIP) initiatives.

### School Climate

Mr. Patterson became principal of Dobie in 1996. Because this is only his second year at the school, he says that he is *"not really sure about the climate."* The principal stated that *"the veteran teachers probably appreciate our efforts more than the new arrivals."* He believes that the rise in achievement has contributed to staff satisfaction.

The teachers that were interviewed stated that the school climate has improved in the past two years. They feel that the current administration of Dobie is progressive and addresses both staff and student needs. The sense of safety and security has improved for teachers and students during the time that Mr. Patterson has been principal of Dobie.

The teachers are involved in decision-making at Dobie in a variety of ways. The Campus Advisory Committee meets monthly and includes parents, teachers, community members, and the principal. The six academic teams meet twice each week. The principal's Cabinet (campus administrators and team leaders) meets monthly. Teachers are also involved in departmental meetings.



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### Parent Participation

The principal and the teachers interviewed believe that parent participation is improving at Dobie, but it is not where they want it to be. There is an improvement in participation this year, according to Mr. Patterson. The new dad's club, named DOBIE (Dads of Boys and Girls Involved in Education), has recruited about a dozen dads to work in the school.

Dobie has reached out to Vietnamese parents through the Adult Literacy Program. The primary goal of the Adult Literacy Program at Dobie is to provide intensive English training to Vietnamese parents to enable them to communicate with teachers and staff at school concerning their child's education. The classes are held twice each week at night to help parents study for the GED tests and to study English as a Second Language. The benefit of the program is not only the English acquisition by these parents, but also the improved communication between these parents and teachers. For the last three years, the program has enrolled an average of 35 to 50 parents.

The teachers who were interviewed believe that middle school is a crucial period in the life of an adolescent, and parent involvement is needed at the same depth and intensity as at elementary grade levels. The teachers admit that it is difficult to get parents to come to the campus. The parent training specialist has helped with this effort. She works with the counselors each Thursday to provide open door, walk-in conference time until 7:00 p.m. Parents are welcome to make appointments or come by as the need arises.

### Special Programs/Teaching Strategies

Dobie uses the interdisciplinary teams structure with 90-minute classes meeting every other day (A/B block schedule). There are six academic teams, two in each grade. Teachers have a 90-minute planning period each day to complete individual plans or to meet with other teachers.

Fifteen minutes of the first block is used for announcements. The Dobie Network News provides Dobie student news and is prepared by the broadcast journalism students. This multimedia curriculum includes a 6th-grade computer graphics course, a 7th- and 8th-grade multimedia design course, and a 8th-grade broadcast journalism course.

The principal is introducing the Quality Schools Concept to the teachers at Dobie. The teachers are currently in training, with implementation in the school in 1998-99 and implementation in the community in 1999-2000.

The STAND (Students Taking A New Direction) program is Dobie's initiative for overage students. Students are placed at the appropriate grade level if they do well in the areas of assessment, attendance, and grades. Overage students attend summer school and then meet once a month during the school year to follow up on goal setting, self-esteem building, and academic projects.

The Accelerated Reader Program encourages students to read books. Students take a test on the computer in the library and get points and rewards based on the number of books that they read. The STAR system is a computer-assisted program to assess students' reading scores schoolwide twice each year, in October and April.

After extensive experience with technology innovation, the faculty and staff of Dobie became aware of the importance of a full-time technical educator and a sufficient budget to augment the district's commitment. The Campus Leadership Team (CLT) and the principal decided to fund a technology coordinator and to commit money for a technology budget to ensure upkeep of the school's three computer labs and provide software to keep Dobie's students at the forefront of

educational technology. The Technology Integration Program is new to Dobie in 1997-98. The goal of the program is to provide every student with the technological competence essential for success in today's society and to help equalize some of the opportunities for access to technology that Dobie students may lack. The Technology Integration Program provides instruction and access to technology to all the students of Dobie as well as providing training, curricular guidance, and technical support for the entire faculty and staff of the school.

Portfolio assessment is being used in the language arts classes. Currently, the language arts department is the only group using portfolios, but other subject areas are encouraged to implement this type of assessment with their students.

Mr. Patterson says that most of the academic initiatives at Dobie are driven by TAAS data. Practice tests produced by the Kamico Company are used four times a year. Released TAAS tests are also used for student assessment. Teachers analyze the TAAS results for areas of strengths and weaknesses. Guidelines and plans for study or tutoring are based on the test data analysis. Parents and students are informed of test results.

### *Professional Development*

Teachers at Dobie are challenged with many changes and initiatives. The principal says that his focus for professional development in 1997-98 includes the following:

- Quality Schools training;
- interdisciplinary teaming;
- Connected Mathematics Project;
- portfolio assessment; and
- gifted/talented or Advanced Placement certification.

When asked about training to teach the middle grade student, the teachers and the principal agreed that there is not enough specific training for middle school teachers. The National Middle School Conference provides helpful information about young adolescents for the teachers who attend, but only a small number of teachers can take advantage of this opportunity. Mr. Patterson says that the reality of the situation is that training is usually given to teachers who are having difficulty. Dobie has a mentorship program for new teachers, but the teachers who were interviewed believe that it is not very effective. The high teacher turnover rate at the middle school level makes the program very demanding for veteran teachers, they said.

### *Achievement*

In 1996-97, Dobie was rated an acceptable school according to the state accountability system after being rated a low-performing school in 1994-95 and 1995-96. The demographic groups with the lowest passing rates during these three years were African American and economically disadvantaged students. Figures 3 through 5 show the progress on TAAS by subject for 1994-95 through 1996-97. Continuous improvement in achievement has occurred in TAAS mathematics from 1995 through 1997. After declines in achievement by most demographic groups in TAAS reading and TAAS writing from 1995 to 1996, achievement improved in these subjects from 1996 to 1997 for all groups. The emphasis for Dobie in 1997-98 is continued improvement in all areas, according to Mr. Patterson.

Figure 3: Dobie TAAS Reading by Disaggregated Group, 1995 through 1997

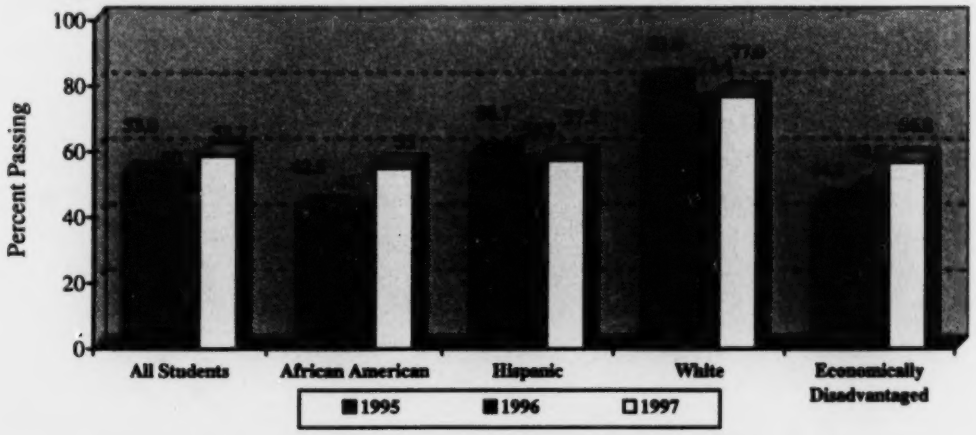



Figure 4: Dobie TAAS Mathematics by Disaggregated Group, 1995 through 1997

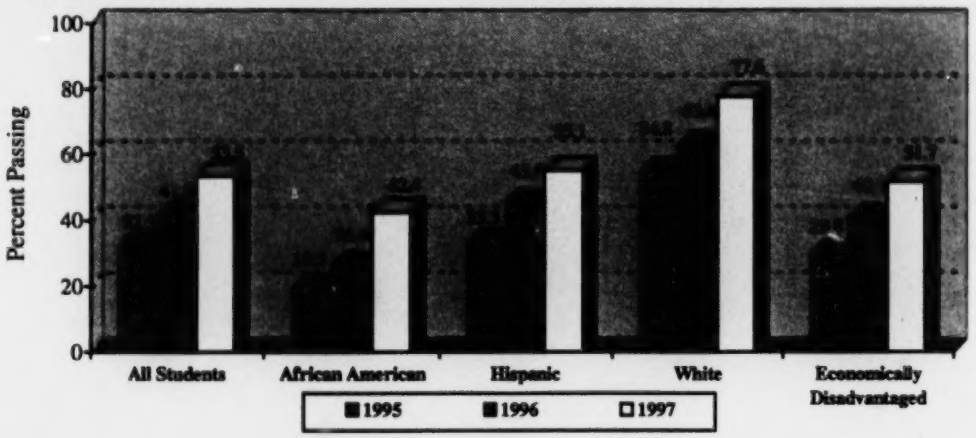
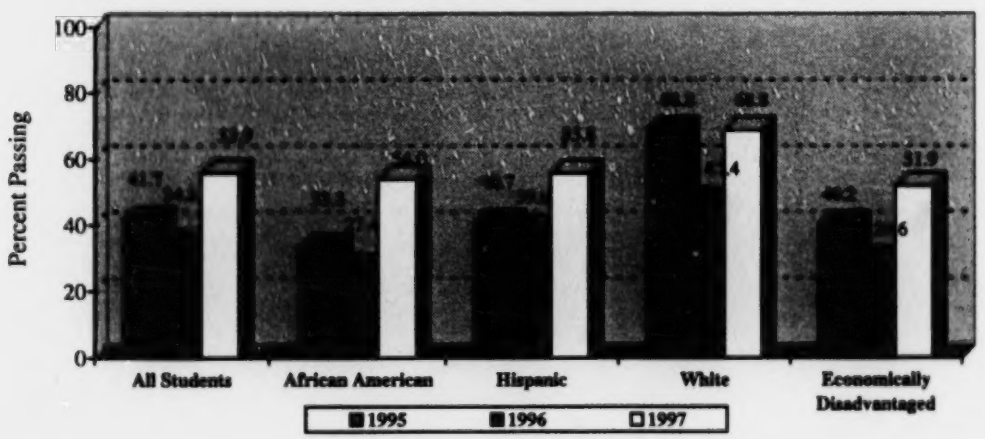



Figure 5: Dobie TAAS Writing by Disaggregated Group, 1995 through 1997



## Fulmore Middle School

Fulmore Middle School is the oldest AISD middle school, having been established in 1892. The present facility in south central Austin was built in 1911. The October 1997 enrollment figures show that, of the 877 grade 6-8 students, 70% are Hispanic, 11% are African American, 17% are Anglo/Other, 1% are Asian, and 1% are Native American. Seventy-one percent of the Fulmore students are from low-income families. Table 2 shows the ethnicity and low income status of Fulmore students from 1994-95 through 1997-98.

Table 2: Demographics for Fulmore Middle School, 1994-95 through 1997-98

| Demographics | 1994-95 | 1995-96 | 1996-97 | 1997-98 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ethnicity | | | | |
| % African Am. | 8 | 10 | 9 | 11 |
| % Hispanic | 68 | 72 | 72 | 70 |
| % Asian | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| % Anglo/Other | 23 | 18 | 18 | 17 |
| % Low Income | 71 | 70 | 70 | 71 |

Note: The 1997-98 demographics reflect the October 23, 1997 enrollment.

Fulmore has received Title I funds for the past two years. The school's 1997-98 Title I allocation is $132,441. According to Salvador Cavazos, the principal of Fulmore, the Title I funds have allowed Fulmore to do the following:

- fund the Quest Academy for after-school enrichment;
- purchase the Accelerated Reader program;
- fund a parent training specialist;
- hire consultants to assist with special projects; and
- fund ESL and GED evening classes for adults.

### School Climate

Mr. Cavazos is in his first year as principal of Fulmore. He believes that the school climate is good for students and teachers at Fulmore, but thinks that the *"change in the air"* (new principal and new district initiatives) causes teacher anxiety. According to Mr. Cavazos, Fulmore has a rich history of nurturing students who generally have positive self-esteem. Student achievement is a top priority this year. Teachers are required to produce focused lesson plans and participate in vertical and horizontal teaming.

The teachers who were interviewed have very positive views about the climate at Fulmore this year. One teacher said that the climate is *"positive, nurturing, and academically challenging."* She believes that *"Fulmore's strong ESL program benefits all students."* Another teacher stated that Fulmore is a diverse school where all groups are valued and respected. *"It is a very inviting and warm school, and is a comfortable place to be,"* she said.

The head of the math department said that, for students, *"the school has rules and parameters on behavior that result in a safe, controlled atmosphere."* For teachers, the climate is *"comfortable, supportive, encouraging, and family-like,"* she added. *"The principal sets a good example in his demeanor, dress, and treatment of others,"* she said.

Teachers are involved at a variety of levels at Fulmore. Curriculum coordinators and team leaders meet with the principal regularly and bring teacher concerns to these meetings, according to the principal. Teachers also participate in decision-making through the Campus Advisory Committee, team meetings, and department meetings.

The teachers interviewed stated that the principal has an open door policy and administrators in general provide strong support for the teachers. One teacher said that *"teachers are actively involved in looking ahead at what needs to be done at the school."*

### Parent Participation

Fulmore has a strong Parent Teacher Association (PTA) that publishes a monthly newsletter. A new program this year is the Fulmore Dad's Club that helps with major events (e.g., by providing traffic control). TAAS Language Arts and Math Nights are well attended. Parent attendance at band and orchestra programs has been strong. Fulmore has a parent representative on the District Advisory Committee.

The parent training specialist at Fulmore works with parents to make them feel comfortable on campus. She has recently received a $33,000 grant to provide after-school GED and ESL classes for parents.

The teachers who were interviewed believe that Fulmore works very hard to improve relations with parents. The parent conference day had a strong turnout this year. The teachers feel that parents are generally very responsive to teacher requests.

### Special Programs/Teaching Strategies

Fulmore uses the interdisciplinary teams structure with 80-90 minute classes meeting every other day (A/B block schedule). There are six academic teams (two language arts, one math, one social studies, and one science teacher assigned to each team). Teachers have one planning period and one conference period each day. Interdisciplinary teams meet every week; departmental meetings are every other week; there is a general faculty meeting every other alternative week.

Another strategy used to create a personalized learning environment is the daily FUNdamentals (equivalent to homerooms in the past). Approximately 20 students are assigned to a teacher. Groups meet regularly, and the students can create a positive relationship with an adult through structured activities outside of the academic areas.

The Quest Academy is a 30-minute time slot used for structured activities such as TAAS Math Tuesdays and Silent Reading Thursdays. A specific activity is scheduled for enrichment each day of the week.

A variety of programs are offered for at-risk students at Fulmore. A Content Mastery lab for high-functioning special education students has recently been made available to at-risk students who could benefit from the instructional techniques used in the lab. Fulmore has received a $300,000 grant to create an instructional model for ESL students. A diverse after-school program is well attended, and one of the programs, Tech Girls, will be featured in a Public Broadcast System program.

Fulmore has a strong fine arts program, as well. The orchestra at Fulmore is the second largest school orchestra in AISD. Mr. Cavazos said that 520 of Fulmore's students participate in the Fine Arts Club.

Fulmore is the only Carnegie middle school in the state. The Carnegie Foundation provides funds for teacher training that focuses on how middle school students learn. The training emphasizes that teachers use group investigation and deductive and inductive learning, while interweaving depth and complexity into their classroom lessons. Fulmore is undertaking a self-study on school improvement initiated by the Carnegie Foundation.

Fulmore collaborates with Southwest Texas State University professors who teach a nine-hour course on middle school students. The university students participate in classrooms at Fulmore and receive instruction while on-site at the school.

Fulmore teachers incorporate Writing Across the Curriculum. This program encourages social studies teachers, for example, to work on persuasive essays as part of their class assignments, which will specifically help prepare students for grade 8 TAAS writing.

Teachers at Fulmore are involved with action research this year. Action research is the systematic study by a faculty of what is happening in the classroom and school, with the aim of improving learning. Fulmore received a waiver from TEA to use this system of evaluating teachers instead of the Texas Teacher Appraisal System. The action research system gives teachers more control over their professional appraisal. Classroom and campus-based action research is recognized as an important means of professional growth for teachers.

### *Professional Development*

Teachers at Fulmore would like to make the use of technology the focus of professional development this year, but Mr. Cavazos says that it is difficult to implement because of the different skill levels of the faculty. Technology training is part of the district initiatives for faculty and staff.

Carnegie training is provided to staff, but not to the entire faculty at one time. Half of the teachers are Carnegie-trained. Mr. Cavazos says that next semester the teachers will be engaged in a book study on brain-based learning as it relates to middle school students.

Math teachers are receiving training in the Connected Mathematics Project, a districtwide initiative. Substitutes are provided so that math teachers can attend the training that is provided before every unit.

### *Achievement*

Teachers receive individual TAAS profiles on all of their students at the beginning of the year, and they use this information to identify student strengths and weaknesses. Teachers must present their strategies for addressing identified weaknesses to the principal. Fulmore teachers also make use of the TAAS release tests, and the principal is working with National Computer Systems to run specific analyses of the results of the administration of the release tests. A consultant works with the teachers on strategies for bringing math into all classes. Writing is also a major focus at Fulmore this year.

In 1994-95 and 1995-96, Fulmore was rated a low-performing school because of low disaggregated scores in mathematics. The 1997 TAAS results show increased achievement by all groups in all subjects from 1996 to 1997. TAAS mathematics scores have improved at an impressive rate from 1995 to 1997. Figures 6 through 8 show the progress on TAAS by subject for 1994-95 through 1996-97.

Figure 6: Fulmore TAAS Reading by Disaggregated Group, 1995 through 1997

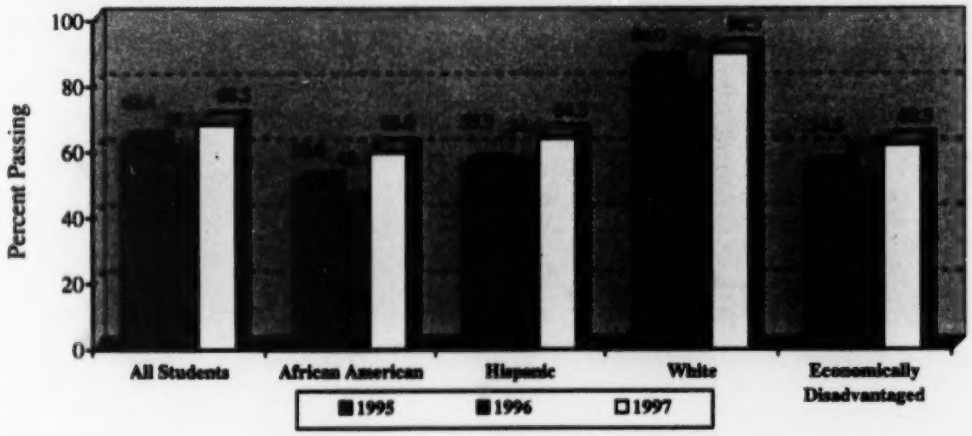



Figure 7: Fulmore TAAS Mathematics by Disaggregated Group, 1995 through 1997

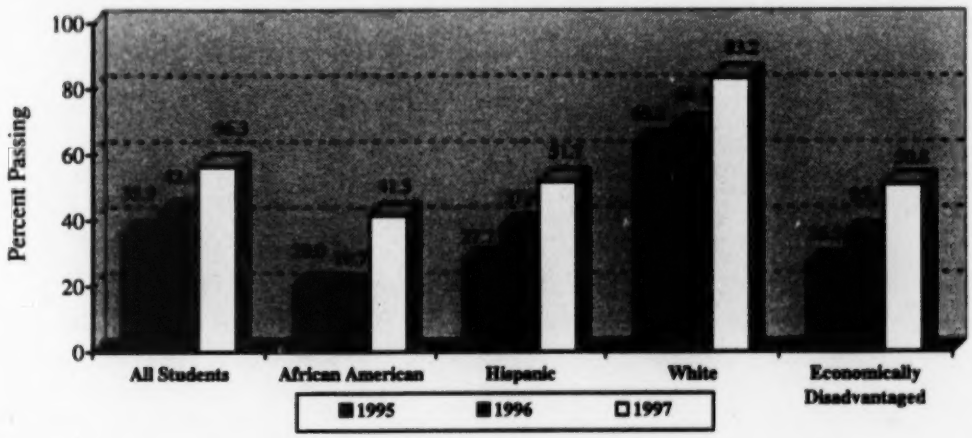
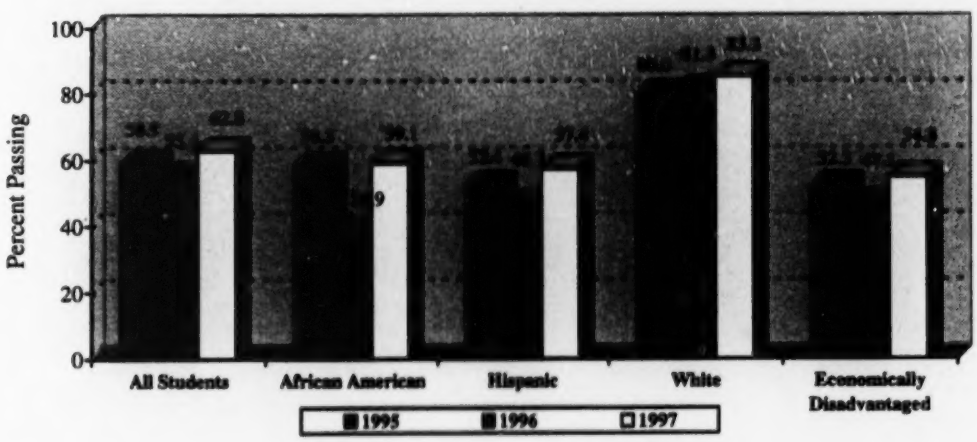



Figure 8: Fulmore TAAS Writing by Disaggregated Group, 1995 through 1997



## Mendez Middle School

Built in 1987, Mendez Middle School serves 1,195 students living in the southeast area of Austin. Of those students attending Mendez, 21% are African American, 69% are Hispanic, 3% are Asian, and 9% are Anglo/Other. Seventy-seven percent of Mendez students meet the requirements for low-income status. Table 3 shows that the percentage of Hispanic students has increased slightly from 1994-95 to 1997-98, while the percentage of Anglo/Other students has decreased. The percentage of low-income students has remained fairly constant from 1995-96 through 1997-98.

Table 3: Demographics for Mendez Middle School, 1994-95 through 1997-98

| Demographics | 1994-95 | 1995-96 | 1996-97 | 1997-98 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ethnicity | | | | |
| % African Am. | 25 | 22 | 22 | 21 |
| % Hispanic | 58 | 66 | 66 | 69 |
| % Asian | <1 | <1 | <1 | <1 |
| % Anglo/Other | 16 | 11 | 12 | 9 |
| % Low Income | 73 | 78 | 79 | 77 |

Note: The 1997-98 demographics reflect the October 23, 1997 enrollment.

Mendez became a Title I school in 1996-97. The 1997-98 Title I allocation for Mendez is $287,492. Mendez uses Title I funds to hire math teachers for the academic support group, to support the after-school enrichment program, and to lower the pupil/teacher ratio in general by hiring additional teachers.

### School Climate

Connie Barr, the principal at Mendez, describes the climate at her school as *"challenging at times, but rewarding."* She stated that Mendez students often lack life skills and team-building skills, coming to her school with a *"blank slate of information."* She believes that the one-on-one contact with students provided by Mendez is very helpful for this type of student, and she believes Mendez provides a nurturing place for students, parents, and teachers. The school has become the center of the community, with a church using the building on Sundays. Teachers describe Mendez as a child-centered, safe place where students can come to be children again. Because of the students' desire to be at school, Mendez provides tutors before school and in after-school enrichment programs. The after-school program offers classes in wrestling, drama, computers, and sign language.

Teachers report that they get along well with other teachers and that the principal creates an open, comfortable environment. Similarly, the principal stated that teachers need to have the most input because they are the ones doing the job and that she does not consider herself the *"boss."* Teachers share notes and lesson plans and new teachers are mentored by the more experienced teachers at the school. Teachers report that they have a good support system, and have a great deal of control over how the school is run. All Mendez teachers participate in teams at the academic and grade levels, and are on school committees that give input to the Campus Advisory Committee (CAC). Teachers are also involved in departmental meetings to give input to the CAC. Teachers meet with their academic team every day and their grade level team about once a month.

### Parent Participation

Ms. Barr stated that, in the past, parents were not coming to the school. Many, she said, were in the United States for the first time and did not know how the school system worked. Some parents had also had a bad experience in school themselves. However, teachers report that Ms. Barr makes the parents feel comfortable at the school. Teachers report that up to 30% of Mendez parents do not speak English, so all communication with parents is conducted in both English and Spanish. Parents are on the CAC, and the school newsletter, *The Maverick*, is sent to parents twice each month. Teachers conduct workshops for parents, which have been well attended, on topics such as writing, reading, math, and instruction on how to work with their children at home. Mendez dedicated a day to parent-teacher conferences with teachers staying at the school as late as 9:00 p.m. to accommodate parents. Teachers also report that parent involvement has increased dramatically since a parent training specialist was hired two years ago.

### Special Programs/Teaching Strategies

Mendez began their Academic Support classes during the 1996-97 school year to meet the needs of at-risk students. Flexible A/B block scheduling, begun at the same time, allows for an Academic Support period for every student at Mendez. During Academic Support, teams work on the specific needs of each student during an eighty-minute block of time. "Bubble" students, or those students who are very close to passing TAAS (TLI of 60-69), receive the help they need to pass. Students receiving lower scores on the TAAS work on math and/or reading at advisory time each day.

Teachers work together and share what they learn at workshops with other teachers. Teachers report that they vary the activities in their classrooms, using an individual approach to working with students. Using Title I funds to hire more math teachers also allows for smaller class sizes, which lets teachers work with students on an individual basis.

Mendez uses the SYSTAT statistical software program to analyze individual TAAS scores as well as to track TAAS performance by ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. Teachers use TAAS scores from the previous year to identify which objectives were not met, and to design appropriate lesson plans. Mendez staff received training from Region 13 on how to use the SYSTAT software. Information gathered from SYSTAT allows staff to look beyond pass/fail rates on the TAAS. Teachers can see trends in student TLI scores and intervene if a student is currently passing TAAS but their TLI scores are dropping.

Mendez also holds a transition camp for 5th graders who will be attending Mendez in the fall. Last summer they invited each feeder school to Mendez for a week to get acquainted with middle school life. In the future, Ms. Barr would like to bring all the feeder schools together during the same week to build bonds between students from different elementary schools.

### Professional Development

During the past year, Ms. Barr has conducted an evaluation of every classroom at Mendez. She believes that no subject is taught in isolation and that there is not just one way to teach. Therefore, instructional strategies have been the focus of professional development this year. The teachers interviewed believe that teacher training in college does not prepare a person for work in a middle school, and that the first couple of years are mostly on-the-job training. The teachers interviewed stated that, while there should be more middle school training offered at universities, a

middle school certification might be too limiting. Ms. Barr agreed that her teachers need more training in this area.

The math teacher interviewed also stated that staff development days are very valuable, and that Mendez math teachers attended the Professional Development Academy six times this year for Connected Math Project inservice. He also stated that he would prefer training outside the school day because he feels that student learning does not take place when the regular teacher is away from the classroom.

### *Achievement*

To target students' instructional needs, Mendez students take a practice TAAS every six weeks. Teachers compare current TAAS results with the previous year's scores to track improvement, and use the TLI scores from the TAAS to format their Academic Support classes and to gear their lessons to instructional needs. All Mendez teachers have received training on how to interpret TAAS results.

After a history of low TAAS performance, especially in mathematics, Mendez had the second largest gains in the percentage of students passing reading and math at the middle school level for AISD in 1997. Figures 9 through 11 show the progress on TAAS, by subject, for 1994-95 through 1996-97. TAAS reading and math scores have increased for all groups over the past three years. TAAS writing scores increased from 1996 to 1997 for African American students and students overall, but have declined slightly for Hispanic, White, and economically disadvantaged students. Ms. Barr believes that the close monitoring of TAAS scores and the use of the Academic Support block to focus on objectives that need improving played a major role in helping students pass TAAS.

Figure 9: Mendez TAAS Reading by Disaggregated Group, 1995 through 1997

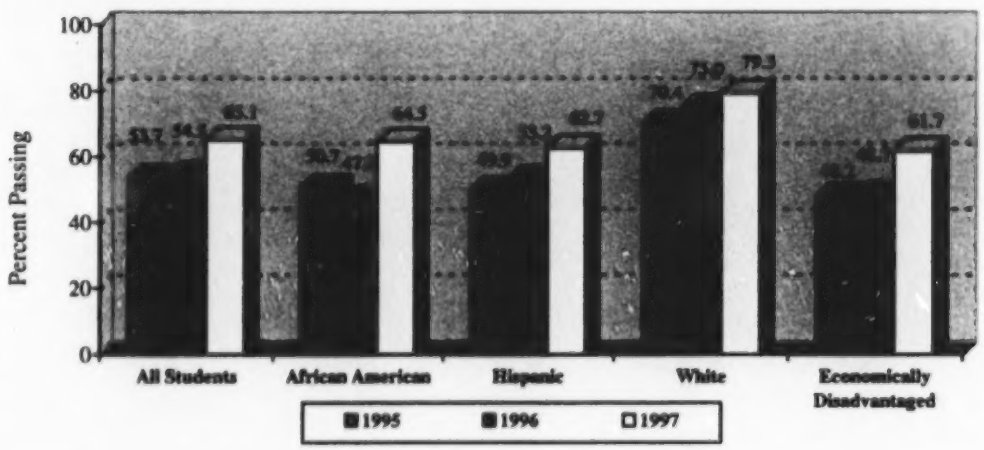


Figure 10: Mendez TAAS Mathematics by Disaggregated Group, 1995 through 1997

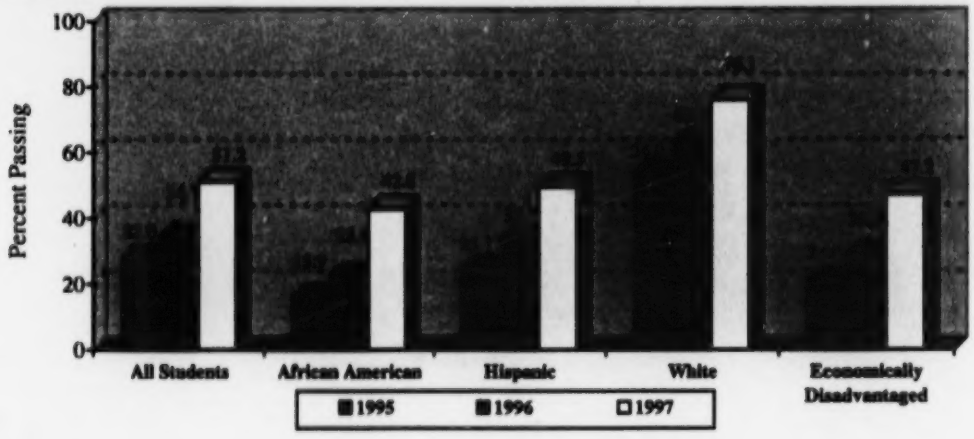
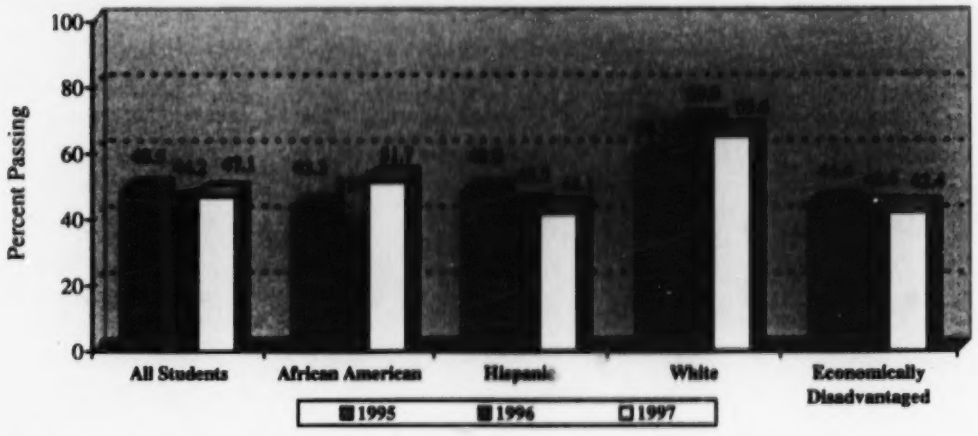



Figure 11: Mendez TAAS Writing by Disaggregated Group, 1995 through 1997



## Pearce Middle School

Pearce Middle School was built in northeast Austin in 1958. Currently 1,040 students in grades 6-8 attend Pearce. Of these students, 55% are African American, 40% are Hispanic, 5% are Anglo/Other, and fewer than 1% are Asian. Demographics in Table 4 show the Asian population remained the same from 1994-95 to 1997-98, African American and Anglo/Other populations decreased, and the Hispanic population increased. Seventy-seven percent of the students are from low-income families.

Table 4: Demographics for Pearce Middle School, 1994-95 through 1997-98

| Demographics | 1994-95 | 1995-96 | 1996-97 | 1997-98 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ethnicity | | | | |
| % African Am. | 60 | 57 | 57 | 55 |
| % Hispanic | 33 | 39 | 39 | 40 |
| % Asian | <1 | <1 | <1 | <1 |
| % Anglo/Other | 6 | 4 | 4 | 5 |
| % Low Income | 76 | 78 | 78 | 77 |

Note: The 1997-98 demographics reflect the October 23, 1997 enrollment

Pearce has received Title I funds since 1995-96, the first year of secondary Title I funding. The 1997-98 Title I allocation for Pearce is $223,304. According to Collette Culp, Pearce principal, Title I funds give her more flexibility for staffing in areas with the greatest need. Ms. Culp says that 1997-98 Title I funds have allowed Pearce to do the following:

- hire additional staff including a helping teacher, two teacher assistants, and a parent training specialist;
- provide staff development; and
- send teachers to local conferences, workshops, and off-site visits.

### School Climate

Although Ms. Culp worked at Pearce Middle School prior to 1997-98, this is her first year as principal. She indicated that the school's climate was in flux, and that veteran teachers at the campus are more attuned to her feelings, goals, and ideas. She feels that although about 84% of the faculty are satisfied, approximately 16% of her staff are *"severely dissatisfied"* with school operations at Pearce.

The teachers that were interviewed described the climate as *"energetic,"* and *"full of great teaming practices."* Although the teaming efforts had the effect of isolating the faculty somewhat, the teachers felt that the overall benefits of teaming outweighed this consideration.

The teachers are involved in decision-making at Pearce through AEIS (Academic Excellence Indicator System) cadres set up by the principal. Each cadre is responsible for developing and writing action steps for one of the academic indicators. These action steps are presented to the principal for approval and for presentation to the appropriate groups. At the campus level, teachers write proposals based on personal ideas or experiences, and share information during staff meetings.

The grade 7 teachers who were interviewed indicated that they hold grade-level and subject-area planning meetings every two weeks. The grade 6 teacher said that the three teams on his grade level meet weekly. Team meetings are part of each day's schedule at Pearce.

### Parent Participation

The principal and teachers who were interviewed agreed that parent participation has improved over last year, perhaps in part to the newly hired parent training specialist and an energetic PTA president. Although the principal and teachers reported a successful turnout of 400 adults and children for TAAS Math Night and an increase in PTA attendance in general, the teachers feel there is still room for more parent involvement in such projects as developing the Campus Improvement Plan. The teachers said it seems only the *"faithful few"* (parents) participate.

### Special Programs/Teaching Strategies

Pearce uses an interdisciplinary teaming strategy with four 90-minute blocks each day. There are currently at least three teams per grade level. The academic portions of the school day are divided between individual student work and large group activities, according to teachers. With the block schedule, subjects are scheduled for alternate days. However, Pearce has chosen to offer language arts daily to grade 6-7 students, and mathematics daily to grade 8 students. Pre-Advanced Placement courses are taught in grades 7-8.

The computer lab at Pearce offers a core curriculum in technology designed to increase computer literacy, and is used to tutor students at risk of failing TAAS. Students may use computers to complete homework assignments with teacher permission.

Additional learning initiatives include an American Folklore unit taught in grade 8, the *Buzzin' About Books* program for grade 7 students using the Lone Star reading series, and a grade 7 Book Buddies Club with Andrews Elementary.

Pearce provides a 10-day transition camp for incoming grade 6 students and career planning for all grade levels. Middle school parent conference days are held twice a year. The Austin Area Urban League provides after-school tutoring and Communities in Schools (CIS) provides mentor-type programs such as Americorps. Extended-year summer school provides instruction to overage students.

### Professional Development

The focus of professional development at Pearce Middle School is on building a team. Ongoing staff development and mentors are made available to new teachers. Staff members attend Quality Schools Consortium and Best Practices workshops. Training is provided to teachers of gifted/talented students throughout the school year and summer months.

Both the principal and teachers interviewed felt that there was no specific training available to teachers on dealing with adolescents. They felt that enterprising persons could get training or available materials through attending conferences such as Common Bond, the Texas Middle School Conference, and the National Middle School Conference.

### Achievement

In 1996-97, Pearce was rated an acceptable school according to the state accountability system after being rated a low-performing school in 1994-95 and 1995-96. Figures 12 through 14

show the progress on TAAS by subject for 1994-95 through 1996-97. The demographic groups with the lowest passing rates during 1994-95 and 1995-96 were African American and economically disadvantaged students. However, in 1996-97, African American students had higher passing rates in TAAS reading and writing than did Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students. Pearce's instructional staff will continue to analyze individual student scores and implement instructional plans to address their needs.

Figure 12: Pearce TAAS Reading by Disaggregated Group, 1995 through 1997

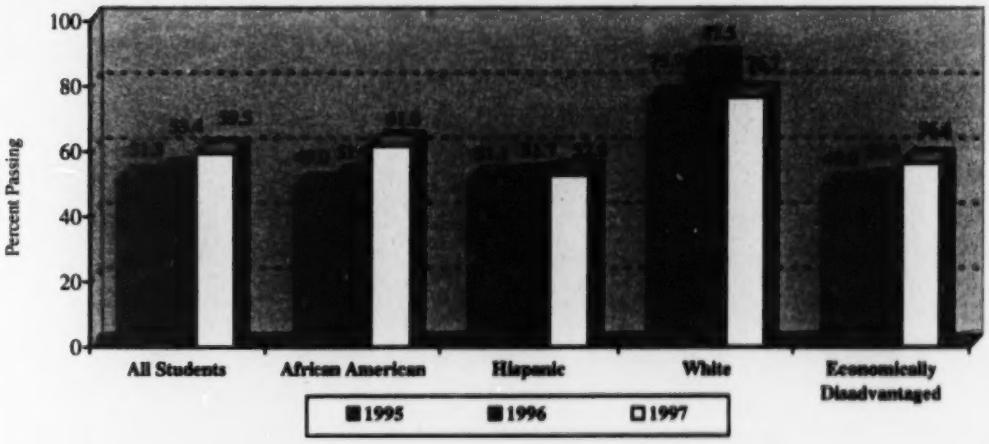



Figure 13: Pearce TAAS Mathematics by Disaggregated Group, 1995 through 1997

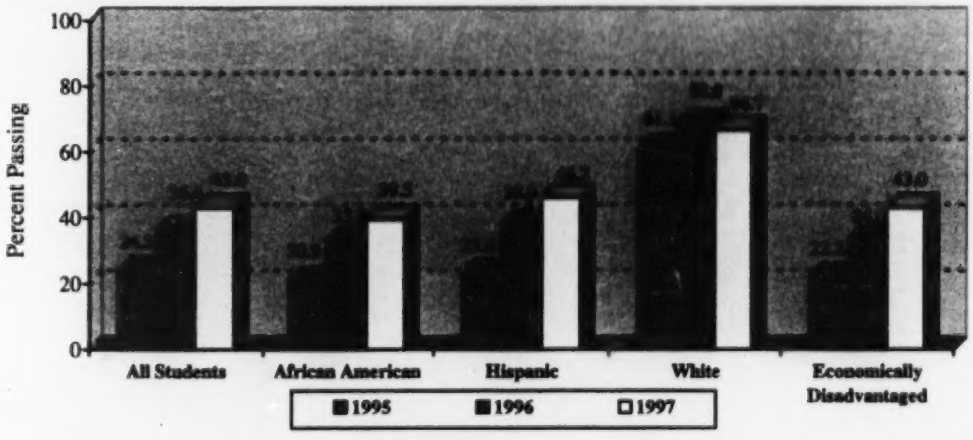
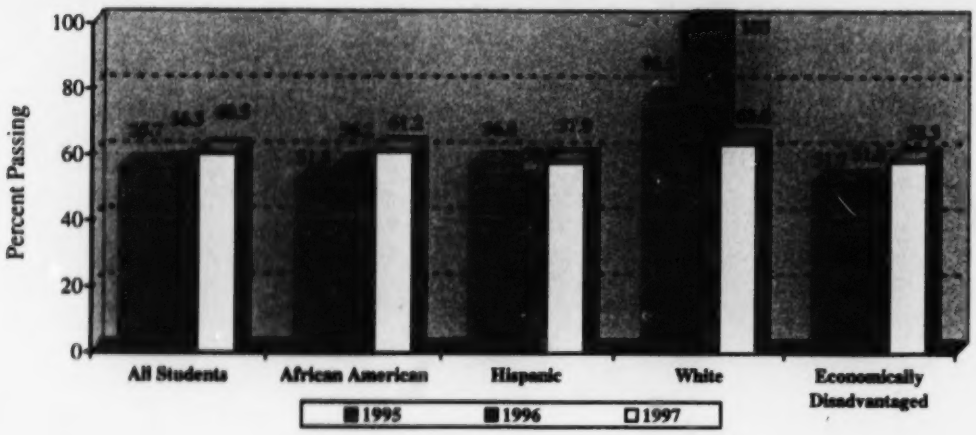


Figure 14: Pearce TAAS Writing by Disaggregated Group, 1995 through 1997



## Webb Middle School

Webb Middle School, built in north Austin in 1968, serves 763 students in grades 6-8 during the 1997-98 school year. Of these, 70% are Hispanic, 18% are African American, and 11% are Anglo/Other. In addition, 84% of the students meet the requirements for low-income status. Table 5 indicates that the percentage of African American and Anglo/Other students has decreased slightly from 1994-95 to 1997-98, while the percentage of Hispanic students has increased during the same period.

Table 5: Demographics for Webb Middle School, 1994-95 through 1997-98

| Demographics | 1994-95 | 1995-96 | 1996-97 | 1997-98 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ethnicity | | | | |
| % African Am. | 24 | 20 | 20 | 18 |
| % Hispanic | 62 | 68 | 68 | 70 |
| % Asian | 1 | <1 | <1 | 1 |
| % Anglo/Other | 13 | 11 | 11 | 11 |
| % Low Income | 83 | 85 | 85 | 84 |

Note: The 1997-98 demographics reflect the October 23, 1997 enrollment.

Webb has received Title I funds since 1995-96, the first year of secondary Title I funding. The school's 1997-98 Title I allocation is $225,514. According to Al Mindiz-Melton, Webb's principal, the Title I funds have been used to do the following:

- hire additional teachers;
- fund a curriculum coordinator and an instructional coordinator;
- provide Guerrilla TAAS training for teachers; and
- purchase library books and software systems.

### School Climate

Mr. Mindiz-Melton describes the climate at Webb as "*pretty good.*" He feels that the students are orderly and purposeful, but the staff is a little overwhelmed with all the changes that have occurred at Webb over the past few years (e.g., returning to a regular calendar after following the year-round calendar for two years, introduction of a restrictive dress code, inauguration of flexible block scheduling). Mr. Mindiz-Melton also stated that an instructional focus has been lacking in the past at Webb, but he and the faculty are working together to correct this. Further, according to the principal, teachers are experiencing pressure because of increased accountability. However, since the implementation this year of a restrictive dress code at Webb, gang activity has been suppressed and the number of disruptions on campus has decreased, resulting in an orderly environment at the school.

The teachers that were interviewed expressed mixed opinions of the school's climate. One teacher felt that the climate is positive, and that it is good for the students to see the "*camaraderie*" that exists among the teachers. Another teacher felt that the climate at Webb is "*divided.*" She said that a large number of teachers enjoy the school and the students, but some teachers think that the school administration is not supportive of them. She also indicated that most of the students like Webb, and they have adjusted to the restricted dress code. The third teacher that was interviewed

expressed the belief that the climate at Webb is improving. She indicated that the teachers in her team work well together. Also, she believes that students have shown more school spirit this year than in previous years, and she indicated that the dress code has made a difference in the students' behavior and attitude.

Teachers are involved in the decision-making process through participation on the Campus Advisory Council and in their academic teams. One teacher commented that flexible block scheduling has given teachers greater autonomy in planning for their students. While teachers' input is sought during the decision-making process, Mr. Mindiz-Melton noted that the final decision rests with him. This sentiment was echoed by one teacher, who commented that the campus is "*principal driven.*"

### *Parent Participation*

As recently as the beginning of the 1996-97 school year, no PTA existed at Webb. According to Mr. Mindiz-Melton, the school now has an active PTA that recently applied for and received a grant for $3,000 from the Austin Community Foundation. The money will enable the group to purchase a popcorn machine that will be used in future fund-raising activities at the school. There is also a Parent Involvement Group at Webb that meets biweekly. This group sponsored a back-to-school picnic in August that was attended by several members of the AISD school board and by Senator Lloyd Doggett. The group was also responsible for pressuring a local landowner into cleaning up a vacant field across from the school that was presenting a hazard to students. The principal also noted that the adoption of the restricted dress code was PTA-driven.

The teachers who were interviewed indicated that parent participation at the school is "*pretty low,*" although one teacher commented that there seems to be more involvement this year than last year. Another teacher noted that parents might become more involved as the climate at the school continues to improve.

### *Special Programs/Teaching Strategies*

Teachers at Webb work on interdisciplinary teams. Each team consists of approximately 110 students, four academic-area teachers (English, mathematics, social studies, and science), a special education aide, and a part-time special education teacher. Teachers of elective areas form their own team. Teachers meet in these teams frequently, and also have departmental planning meetings. There are no grade-level planning meetings at the school.

Along with an interdisciplinary teaming approach, Webb has adopted flexible block scheduling to address the specific needs of its students. This strategy allows teacher teams to decide among themselves how time will be allocated for the various academic subjects. Bells ring only at the beginning and end of each day and to announce lunch periods. Students take electives twice each day while the teachers on the academic teams have planning periods. Mr. Mindiz-Melton believes that teachers are slowly taking advantage of the freedom allowed by this strategy, but commented that most teachers still follow the traditional schedule.

Webb teachers use several strategies to address the special needs of their at-risk students. Saturday TAAS camps are available for grade 6 students who did not master the TAAS mathematics objectives when they were in grade 5. This tutoring effort is supported through district tutorial funds and a $45,000 TEA staff development grant that was awarded to Webb.

During the 1997-98 school year, Webb instituted a policy of full inclusion for its special education students. According to Mr. Mindiz-Melton, 82% of Webb's special education students are in full-inclusion classrooms. There is no resource teacher or pullout program at the school. Each academic team is assigned a special education teacher, and there are 15 special education students assigned to each team. The full-inclusion effort is supported by a grant that Webb received from ESC Region XIII.

There are several transition programs available to Webb students. Incoming students attend a 6th grade transition camp during the summer. Each new 6th grader in attendance receives a white polo-type shirt that they can wear at school to satisfy a portion of the school's restricted dress code. Another transition activity involves 5th grade students from Webb's feeder schools, who are brought to the campus for orientation when choice sheets are due for middle school courses.

### *Professional Development*

According to the principal, professional development this school year has concentrated on reading, mathematics, writing, and dropout prevention. Teachers have focused on mathematics through the Connected Mathematics Project inservice, and language arts have been addressed through a Guerrilla TAAS training. Teachers are also doing a book study with the principal on *Cognitive Coaching*. In addition, teachers have received collaborative teaching instruction.

When asked about specific training to address the needs of young adolescents, Mr. Mindiz-Melton indicated that there should be a special middle school certification for grades 6-8. He commented that, the reality is, there is no special training provided for middle school teachers. The principal attended the National Middle School Conference, along with his instructional coordinator and curriculum coordinator, and brought back ideas and information for his staff. The teachers who were interviewed at Webb said that they had attended workshops and conferences that provided useful information, and one teacher mentioned a middle school forum sponsored by AISD several years ago. However, one of the teachers mentioned that she had not received any information at her content-area workshops that was specific to young adolescents.

### *Achievement*

Teachers at Webb receive copies of their students' TAAS results at the beginning of the school year. Objective-level information is used to determine areas of weakness that will need reinforcement during the year. TAAS practice tests are administered regularly, and the results are analyzed by student and by grade. According to the principal, academic teams plan strategies to use with students who need additional instruction to master TAAS. In addition to TAAS information, teachers use portfolios in some academic areas to measure progress. The Brigance assessment system and the STAR electronic grade-level assessments are used to determine the effectiveness of the reading program.

In 1994-95, Webb received a low performing rating from TEA based on the school's TAAS scores. Since that time, continuous improvement in achievement has occurred in reading, writing, and mathematics. Figures 15 through 17 show the progress on TAAS by subject for 1994-95 through 1996-97. It can be seen that the average percent passing on writing and mathematics was higher in 1996-97 than it was in 1994-95 across all disaggregated groups. Reading scores for the Hispanic students at Webb have shown a decline over the three-year period, however, although this pattern is not repeated with other disaggregated groups.

Figure 15: Webb TAAS Reading by Disaggregated Group, 1995 through 1997

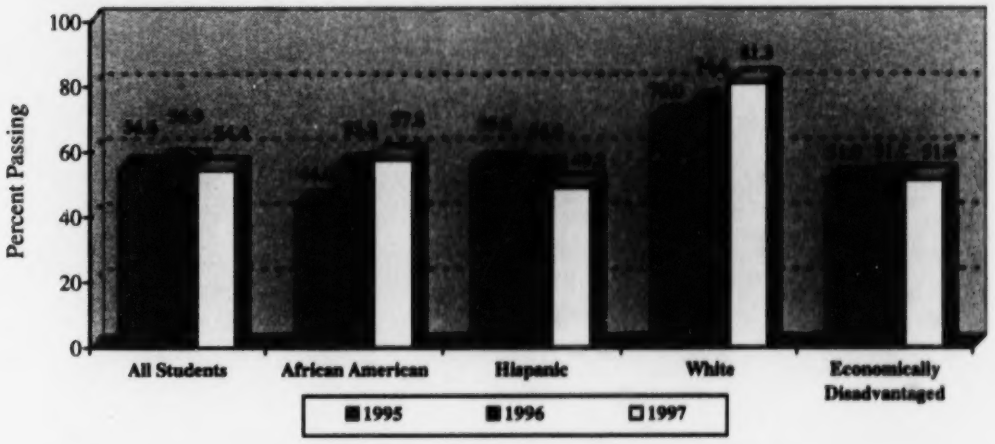



Figure 16: Webb TAAS Mathematics by Disaggregated Group, 1995 through 1997

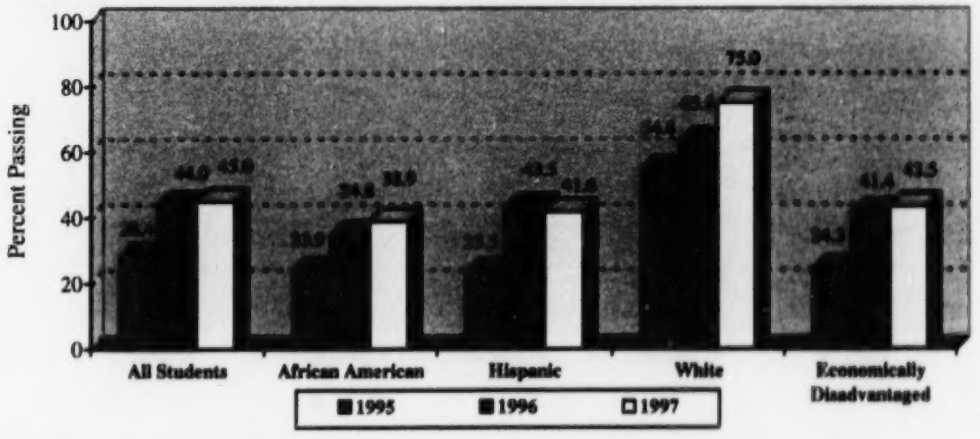
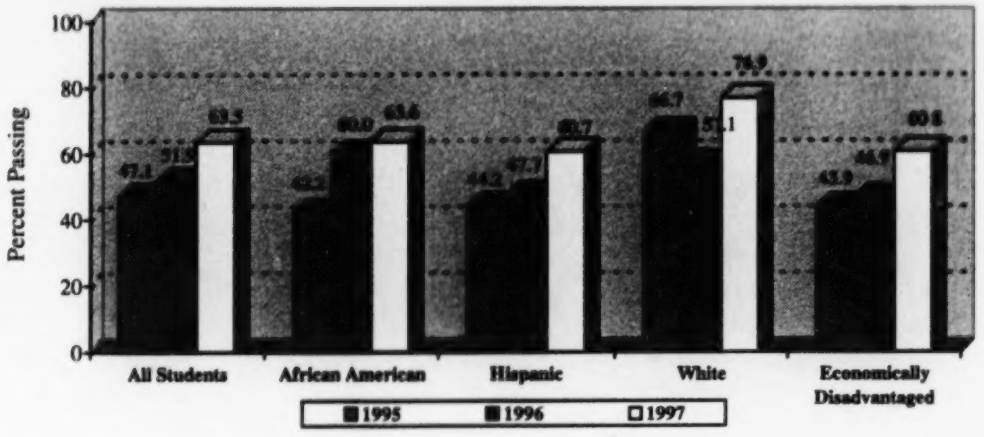



Figure 17: Webb TAAS Writing by Disaggregated Group, 1995 through 1997



# DATA ANALYSES

## Teacher Surveys

Information supplied by middle school teachers is an important component of this evaluation. Teacher input was obtained through the campus interviews (summarized with each school report) and two survey instruments. A multiple choice survey was distributed to teachers at the Title I middle schools prior to the site visits. In addition, a districtwide coordinated survey was sent to a sample of Title I and non-Title I middle school teachers. The teacher survey instruments can be found in Appendices A and B. A summary of the results of the teacher surveys follows.

### *Schoolwide Survey*

Teachers at each of the Title I middle schools were invited to respond to a multiple-choice survey about their campus. A total of 163 teachers responded to the survey, ranging from 18 teachers at Pearce to 46 teachers at Fulmore. In general, teachers responded positively to the statements about their campus. The strongest agreement among teachers concerned the statement, *"Teachers at my school are free to adapt the curriculum to address individual learning."* Survey responses also indicated that teachers feel encouraged to find the best strategies to work with their students. In addition, respondents agreed that TAAS data are beneficial to the classroom teacher.

The question with the widest range of responses across campuses referred to students having positive feelings about their school. Pearce teachers were generally unsure about this statement (average response of 2.9), while Fulmore teachers agreed most strongly (average response of 4.2). Table 6 shows the mean responses to the teacher survey by campus.

**Table 6: Mean Responses to Title I Middle School Teacher Survey by Campus**

| Survey Question | Dobie (n=34) | Fulmore (n=46) | Mendez (n=27) | Pearce (n=18) | Webb (n=28) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| There is a feeling of [illegible] among teachers and students at my school. | 3.8 | 4.2 | 4.2 | 3.2 | 3.7 |
| Students have positive feelings about the school. | 3.7 | 4.2 | 3.7 | 2.9 | 3.4 |
| Teachers at my school are free to adapt the curriculum to address individual student learning styles. | 4.5 | 4.1 | 4.7 | 4.1 | 4.1 |
| TAAS data are beneficial to the classroom teacher. | 4.3 | 4.0 | 4.7 | 4.0 | 3.8 |
| Professional development opportunities available to my school district meet the needs of [illegible] | 4.0 | 3.3 | 3.8 | 3.4 | 3.4 |

Note: Scale is as follows: 5=Strongly Agree; 4= Agree; 3=Unsure; 2=Disagree; 1=Strongly Disagree

In terms of percentage of teachers responding to individual survey items, 92% of teachers overall agreed or strongly agreed that they are free to adapt the curriculum to address individual student learning styles. The strongest disagreement was in response to the statement about professional development. Sixteen percent of the teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed that



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professional development opportunities addressing the unique needs of middle school teachers are available to them. Because middle school teachers have either elementary or high school certification as opposed to specific middle school certification, they come to this setting with different perspectives about students and learning. One teacher commented that there is not enough training on how to involve parents at the middle school level. Other professional development needs for middle school teachers included study skills and behavior management, as well as whole school involvement in success for each student.

### *Districtwide Coordinated Survey*

The districtwide coordinated survey was mailed to district employees in spring 1998. A sample of Title I and non-Title I middle school teachers received surveys with questions specific to middle school. Table 7 shows the percentage of responses for each of the coordinated survey questions by Title I and non-Title I teachers.

**Table 7: Responses to Districtwide Coordinated Survey by Title I and Non-Title I Schools**

| Coordinated Survey Questions | % Title I Middle School Teachers | % Non-Title I Middle School Teachers |
|---|---|---|
| I am certified to teach the following: | | |
| Elementary | 29 | 17 |
| Secondary | 36 | 55 |
| Elementary and Secondary | 36 | 26 |
| Not Certified | 0 | 2 |
| I have taught at my current school for the following number of years: | | |
| This is my first year. | 18 | 29 |
| 1-3 years | 25 | 22 |
| 4-5 years | 35 | 27 |
| 6-10 years | 12 | 18 |
| 11-15 years | 9 | 11 |
| More than 15 years | 2 | 3 |
| On a typical day, the majority of my instructional time is planned for the following structure: | | |
| Large Groups | 34 | 46 |
| Small Groups | 50 | 40 |
| Individual Activity | 16 | 13 |
| The instruction/teaching strategies used at my school are based on current research. | | |
| Strongly Agree | 26 | 35 |
| Agree | 58 | 48 |
| Not sure | 12 | 15 |
| Disagree | 4 | 1 |
| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 1 |
| At my school, parents take advantage of opportunities to participate in their child's education. | | |
| Strongly Agree | 7 | 15 |
| Agree | 24 | 45 |
| Not Sure | 15 | 13 |
| Disagree | 31 | 21 |
| Strongly Disagree | 22 | 6 |

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The largest discrepancy between Title I and non-Title I middle school teachers concerned parent involvement. At Title I middle schools, 31% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that parents take advantage of opportunities to participate in their child's education while 60% of the non-Title I teachers agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

Teachers from Title I and non-Title I middle schools who responded to the survey varied in their teaching certification and the number of years at their current school. A majority (55%) of the non-Title I middle school teachers have secondary certification compared to elementary certification (26%). Title I middle school teachers who responded represent a balance among those who have elementary, secondary, and both certifications. Sixty-eight percent of the Title I middle school teachers who responded to the survey have four or more years of experience at their current school, while 59% of the teachers at non-Title I middle schools have similar experience.

The primary mode of instruction also differs between these two groups of teachers. Forty-six percent of non-Title I teachers responded that the majority of their class time is structured around the large group (vs. 34% for Title I teachers). Small group and individual activities were the most popular mode of instruction with Title I teachers, possibly because these strategies better address the special needs of their students. Title I and non-Title I teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the innovative teaching strategies used at their school are based on current research (83% and 84%, respectively).

## Achievement Data

The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) is used by all of the middle schools to measure students' academic performance. Figures 18 through 20 show the percentage of Title I, non-Title I, and all AISD middle school students passing TAAS reading, mathematics, and writing. Non-Title I middle schools had a higher percentage of students passing TAAS than did Title I middle schools across subjects and disaggregated groups. When the percentage of all students passing TAAS is compared, Title I schools fall behind non-Title I middle schools by at least 20 percentage points across subject areas. However, the economically disadvantaged students at Title I and non-Title I middle schools passed TAAS reading and mathematics at similar rates in 1997.

Figure 18: Percent Passing 1997 TAAS Reading for Title I Middle Schools, Non-Title I Middle Schools, and All AISD Middle Schools

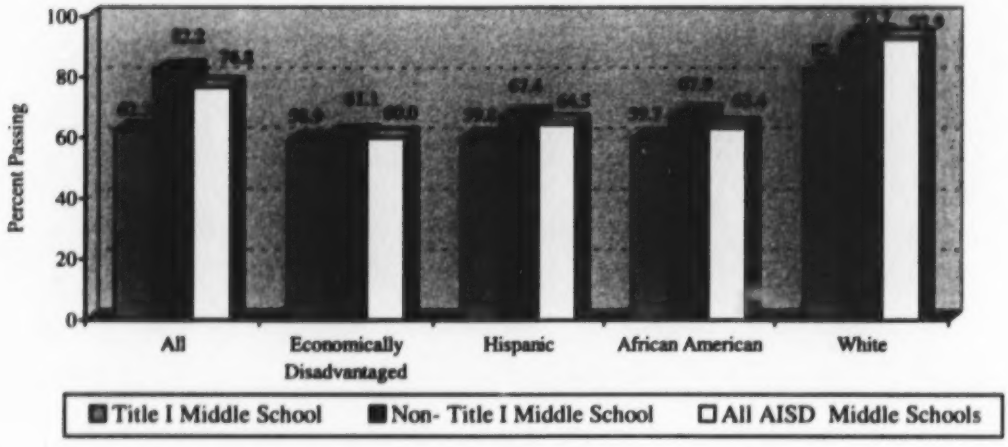



Figure 19: Percent Passing 1997 TAAS Mathematics for Title I Middle Schools, Non-Title I Middle Schools, and All AISD Middle Schools

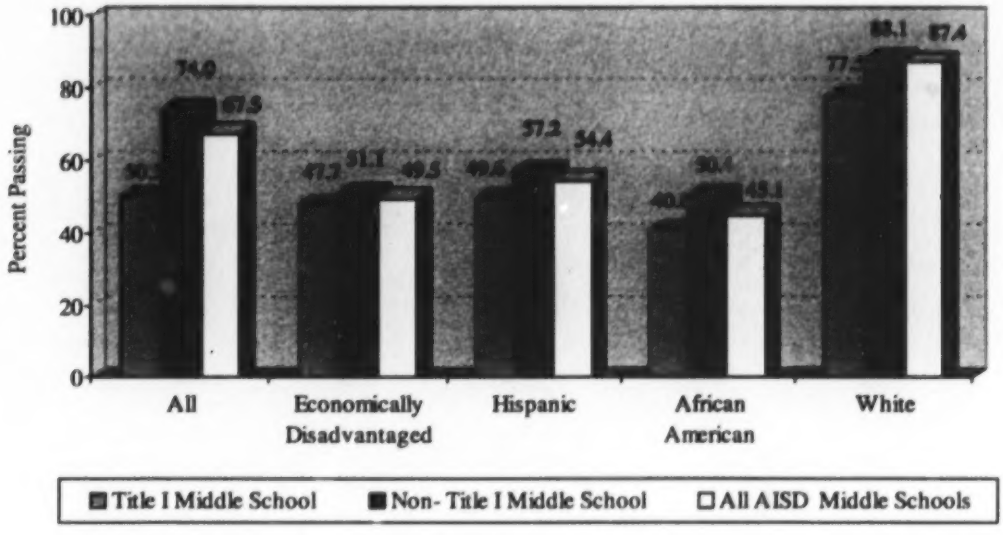
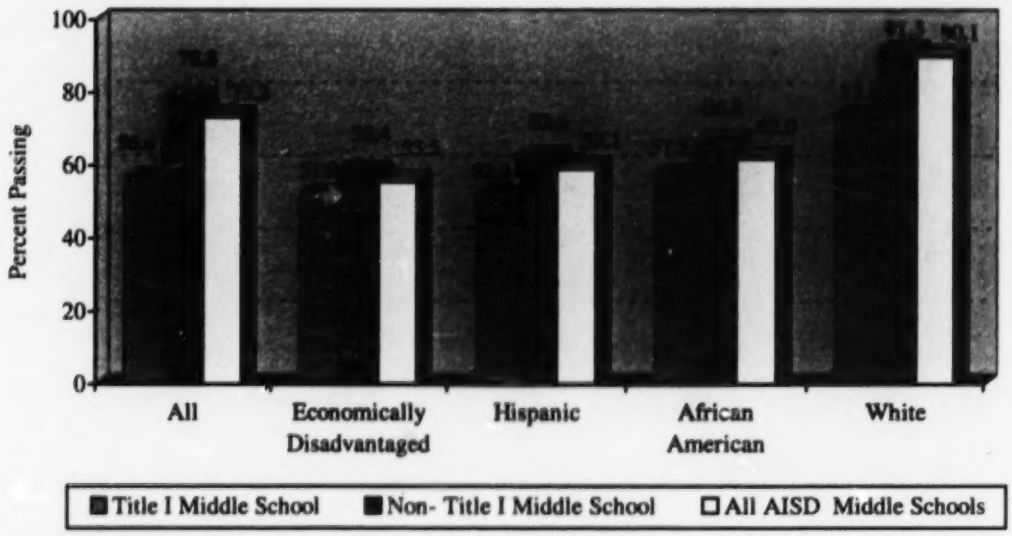


Figure 20: Percent Passing 1997 TAAS Writing for Title I Middle Schools, Non-Title I Middle Schools, and All AISD Middle Schools




The Texas Learning Index (TLI) is a measure of individual student growth and a predictor of exit-level success. A score of 70 in grades 3-8 indicates that a student is on track to pass the exit-level TAAS. Figures 21 and 22 show the average TLI scores for TAAS reading and mathematics for Title I middle school, non-Title I middle school, and all AISD middle school students. The average TLI scores for non-Title I middle school students were higher than for Title I middle school students on TAAS reading and mathematics in 1997. However, the gap in scores between the Title I and non-Title I middle school students is not as great for the TLI as for the percentage passing TAAS. The average TLI for Title I middle school students was 70 or more for all disaggregated groups in TAAS reading, although the TAAS mathematics TLI scores for Title I students were below 70 for every group except White students.

Figure 21: Average TLI on 1997 TAAS Reading for Title I Middle Schools, Non-Title I Middle School Students, and All Middle School Students

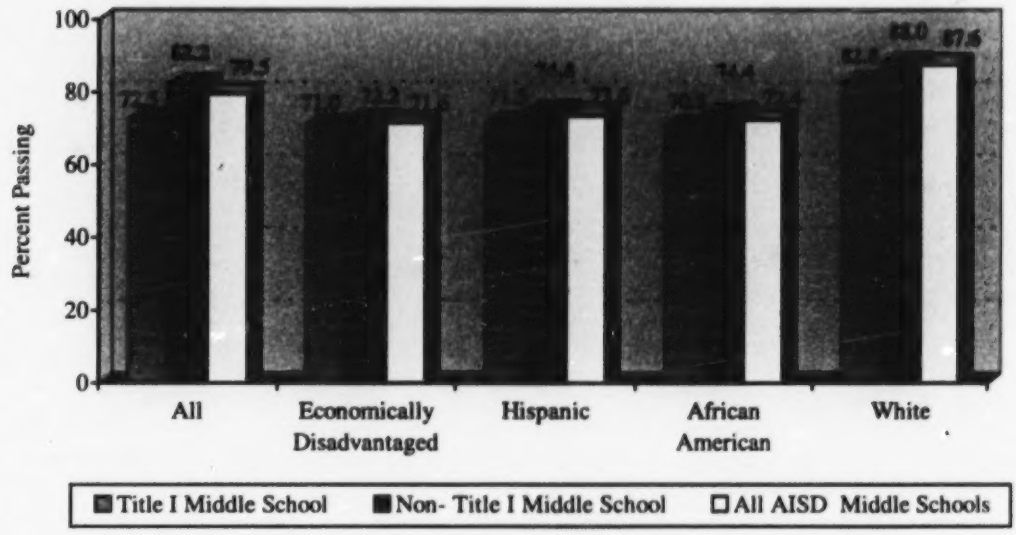
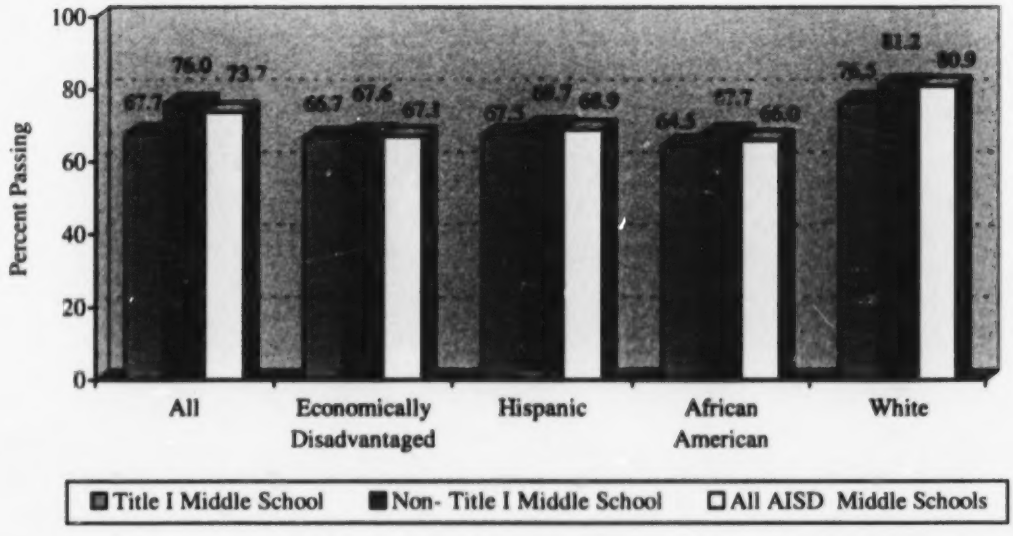



Figure 22: Average TLI on 1997 TAAS Mathematics for Title I Middle Schools, Non-Title I Middle School Students, and All Middle School Students



# SUMMARY

## Common Goals, Unique Programs

### Demographics

The five Title I middle schools have common characteristics while each school maintains a unique atmosphere. The most obvious similarity is the ethnic makeup of the Title I middle schools. All of the schools have a high economically disadvantaged population (ranging from 71% to 84%). The Hispanic and African American student percentages at the Title I middle schools are higher than the corresponding percentages for the district. On the other hand, the Anglo/Other percentage at the Title I middle schools is almost four times lower than the district average. However, it should be noted that the changes in the Title I middle school student demographics mirror AISD districtwide trends.

### Leadership

Strong leadership is key to the improvements that are occurring at the Title I middle schools. While all of the principals have many years of experience in administration, they come from different backgrounds. Two of the principals (Dobie and Webb) moved to middle school administration after serving at elementary campuses. Two of the principals (Mendez and Pearce) had previous experience at the middle school level before becoming middle school principals. One principal (Fulmore) came to the district from a high school campus. All five of the principals are in their first or second year at their present campus.

The styles of leadership are different, but the effect is the same—improved student achievement. Styles range from principal-driven to a strong teacher-input model. Teachers who were interviewed were very pleased with the direction in which their principal was leading the campus. Improved student and teacher morale has been correlated with improved student achievement. According to *The Informed Educator* (October 1997), *"An effective change agent must not only be a good leader (someone who has a vision), but also a good manager (someone who can help others design and implement plans)."* The AISD Title I principals seem to demonstrate these qualities.

### School Climate

An atmosphere of change can be detected at all of the Title I middle schools. One principal commented that staff can be overwhelmed by the changes in leadership, curriculum, student demographics, and accountability at a school.

Because the teachers and administrators are working together for improvement in student achievement, the climate at most of these schools is very positive. Teachers seem to appreciate the efforts of the principal to improve student performance. Most of the teachers interviewed felt that they were involved in planning for the school. With the use of the interdisciplinary teams, teachers work closely with colleagues on their grade level. Teachers stated that they believe the climate at their school is challenging and rewarding.

### Parent Participation

Only one of the Title I middle schools (Fulmore) indicated that there was strong parent involvement at the campus. Teachers and principals at the other middle schools reported that parent

participation is improving, but that it is not yet at the desired level. Four of the five schools have a parent training specialist who helps with parent communication. Teachers and administrators encourage parents to become involved at the campus in various ways, such as offering workshops to help parents work with their children at home, providing GED and ESL training, staying late for parent-teacher conferences, and sending newsletters to parents in English and Spanish.

### Special Programs/Teaching Strategies

Each Title I middle school is implementing special practices and programs to deal with the unique challenges of the campus. Examples of these practices include the following:

- *Dobie* – The Vietnamese Adult Literacy Program is important to the Dobie community because Vietnamese parents learn English, which helps them communicate with teachers and help their children at home. The Technology Integration Program offers students the chance to become familiar with new technology that they might not have available at home. The Quality Schools program is being introduced to teachers this year at Dobie.
- *Fulmore* – The Carnegie Foundation provides training and support for Fulmore through the Carnegie Middle School program. Fulmore has strong after-school and fine arts programs to supplement the standard curriculum. Action research and collaboration with Southwest Texas State University to give college students a firsthand look at middle schools are progressive programs at Fulmore.
- *Mendez* – Tutoring before school and the after-school enrichment program give students extra instruction time. Teachers have implemented academic support classes to help students work on specific academic problem areas. Mendez is using SYSTAT to analyze TAAS results for individual students. Teachers are involved in holding training to help parents know how to help their children with learning at home.
- *Pearce* – The Austin Area Urban League provides after-school tutoring for at-risk students at Pearce. Students can increase their reading ability through the Book Buddies program with Andrews Elementary. Pre-AP classes are available to grade 7-8 students.
- *Webb* – Webb has adopted flexible block scheduling to address the specific needs of its students. This strategy allows teacher teams to decide among themselves how time will be allocated for the various academic subjects. Webb is a full inclusion campus. The restrictive dress code at Webb is the only one in place at an AISD middle school.

All of the middle school campuses use the interdisciplinary teaming approach to allow students and teachers to be part of a small group. These schools also offer specific help to at-risk students through after-school programs, academic support teams, or advisories.

### Professional Development

In addition to campus professional opportunities, AISD teachers have the added benefit of attending courses at the district's Professional Development Academy (PDA). Most of the classes offered at PDA specifically for middle school teachers are in academic areas. While many of the student management courses deal with general discipline issues for K-12, only one course for new middle school teachers, *Working Effectively with Middle School Students*, addresses this age group specifically. All of the teachers interviewed at the Title I middle schools believe that training which deals with the special needs of the middle school student is lacking in their professional development.

Two important training topics this year are the required district technology competencies and the Connected Mathematics Project (CMP) training for grade 6 mathematics teachers. CMP, developed at Michigan State University, was funded by the National Science Foundation to develop a complete mathematics curriculum with teacher support materials for the middle grades. The CMP instructional model encourages higher-level thinking skills and problem-solving strategies that help students make sense of mathematics and its uses. The program is being implemented districtwide at grade 6 in 1997-98, with grades 7-8 to be added in subsequent years. Training for other middle school initiatives in which staff may be involved include pre-Advanced Placement classes, gifted and talented training, and topics of interest at the campus level.

### *Achievement*

The most common characteristic of the Title I middle schools is change efforts directed at improving student achievement. All of the AISD Title I middle schools received an unacceptable rating by the Texas Education Agency in 1995. The changes that schools are currently implementing are designed to improve student learning and teacher preparedness. The 1997 TAAS results indicated that all of the Title I middle schools met that year's goal of 35% passing for the entire student body and each disaggregated group. While improvement is evident the challenge remains, as the required percent passing TAAS for TEA accountability purposes continues to increase each year.

AISD's Title I middle schools used other methods of assessment in addition to TAAS. Portfolios, computer software, and Guerrilla Math materials are a few examples of strategies that were used by some of the schools to better assess the needs of students.

### *Title I Funds*

Title I funds make many of the innovations at the middle schools possible. Staff development, computer hardware and software, consultants, and new teaching strategy materials are some of the items that have been purchased at the Title I middle schools to enhance learning. Principals say that the flexibility allowed with Title I funds enables them to hire additional personnel to staff areas of greatest need. These personnel include parent teacher specialists, assistant principals, curriculum coordinators, technology coordinators, classroom teachers, and teacher assistants.

# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Principal and Teacher Surveys

### Middle School Interview
### Principal

*I. School Climate*

A. How would you describe your school climate?
B. How are teachers involved in the decision-making process at your school?
C. How involved in your school are parents and the community? How does their involvement affect your school climate?

*II. Special Programs/Teaching Strategies*

A. Does your school use interdisciplinary teaming, families, advisories, or other strategies to create a personalized learning environment?
B. What strategies or programs does your school use to meet the special needs of at-risk students?
C. Are transition programs available for students when they enter from elementary school and when they leave middle school to go to high school? If so, please describe those programs.

*III. Student Achievement*

A. How do you use TAAS data to ensure that the academic needs of your students are being met?
B. What information other than test scores is used to determine if a strategy is effective with your students?
C. How has the addition of Title I funds to your budget improved student achievement?

*IV. Professional Development*

A. What is the focus of professional development at your campus this year?
B. Is training provided to equip teachers with the special knowledge and skills needed to teach middle grade students and young adolescents?

## Middle School Interview
## Teacher

1. How would you describe your school climate?

2. Are teachers involved in the decision-making process concerning academic programs at your campus? If so, how are they involved?

3. How do you use TAAS results to target student instructional needs?

4. Research indicates that parent participation in school falls off significantly in middle schools. Do you feel that this is true for your campus?

5. How is the academic part of your day organized?

6. Do teachers at your school plan together by grade level, by subject area, or by team? How many planning periods do you have each day?

7. Because there is no special certification for teaching middles grades, what special training have you received to prepare you for teaching young adolescents?

## Multiple Choice Survey
## Teacher

*This survey is part of a look at the Title I middle schools. Please complete the following survey and return it to the principal. A member of the Office of Program Evaluation staff will pick up the survey at the conclusion of our site visit. Thanks for your cooperation.*

1. There is a feeling of community among teachers and students at my school.
   a) Strongly Agree
   b) Agree
   c) Unsure
   d) Disagree
   e) Strongly Disagree

2. Students have positive feelings about this school.
   a) Strongly Agree
   b) Agree
   c) Unsure
   d) Disagree
   e) Strongly Disagree

3. Teachers at my school are free to adapt the curriculum to address individual student learning styles.
   a) Strongly Agree
   b) Agree
   c) Unsure
   d) Disagree
   e) Strongly Disagree

4. TAAS data are beneficial to the classroom teacher.
   a) Strongly Agree
   b) Agree
   c) Unsure
   d) Disagree
   e) Strongly Disagree

5. Professional development opportunities available to me address the unique needs of middle school teachers.
   a) Strongly Agree
   b) Agree
   c) Unsure
   d) Disagree
   e) Strongly Disagree

## Appendix B: Districtwide Coordinated Survey

### Title I Middle School Questions

SAMPLE: **Title I Middle school teachers and administrators** (Dobie, Fulmore, Mendez, Pearce, and Webb)
**Non-Title I middle school teachers and administrators** (Kealing, Lamar, Burnet, O.Henry, Porter, Martin, Murchison, Bedichek, Covington, and Bailey)
(Please report results by Title I and Non-Title I)

1) I am certified to teach the following:
   a) Elementary
   b) Secondary
   c) Elementary and Secondary
   d) Not Certified

2) I have taught at my current school for the following number of years:
   a) This is my first year.
   b) 1-3 years
   c) 4-5 years
   d) 6-10 years
   e) 11-15 years
   f) More than 15 years

3) On a typical day, the majority of my instructional time is planned for the following structure:
   a) Large Groups
   b) Small Groups
   c) Individual Activity

4) The innovative teaching strategies used at my school are based on current research.
   a) Strongly Agree
   b) Agree
   c) Not Sure
   d) Disagree
   e) Strongly Disagree

5) At my school, parents take advantage of opportunities to participate in their child's education.
   e) Strongly Agree
   f) Agree
   g) Not Sure
   h) Disagree
   i) Strongly Disagree

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